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ABSTRACT

A conflict between the author, engaged in doctoral research in a rural Kenyan community, and an older village woman is narrated. The author suggests that anthropologists must be sensitive to the way in which their own cultural perceptions influence their interpretations of women's behavior in other cultures. The Kenyan village is characterized by two principles of authority: older persons have authority over younger and males have authority over females. However, while men are awarded rightful dominance, women have real power, particularly in the domestic arena. The conflict occurred when the older village woman instructed the other village women not to participate in the research that the narrator was carrying out. When confronted, the older woman asserted that the researcher should have asked permission to interview "her" women. The offended woman made attempts to have local authorities oust the research team from the village. Although eventually the research was completed, the author realizes that she had unwittingly placed herself in competition with the older woman for power over the other women. Both women, by manifesting values, attitudes, and behaviors expected of women in their own cultures, collectively contributed to the conflict. (KC)

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"In the End You Will Carry Me in Your Car": Sexual Politics in the Field

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December 1982

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Paper prepared for the symposium "Confronting Problems of Bias in Feminist Fieldwork", Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Mari H. Clark, organizers, 1982 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington, D. C.

Introduction[1]

When an anthropologist goes to the field to carry out research she or he strives to participate in the life of the community selected for study. The participant observation approach has become a methodological hallmark of the discipline. It has been an important contributor to the romantic aura which continues to surround anthropology. The National Geographic image of the lone anthropologist -- notebook in hand and cameras slung about her neck surrounded by curious, exotic-looking people -- has not faded even though many anthropologists now work in urban American and European contexts. But whether the research context is metropolitan America or similar to that projected by National Geographic, certain problems are shared.

The question of how an investigator's presence is affecting on-going social life and the particular persons or activities of enquiry becomes paramount when that investigator is a 24-hour-a-day live-in observer and potential participant. This concern remains no matter what theoretical orientation guides the research. For example, if the investigator works within a more or less positivist scientific paradigm, the concern is phrased in terms of investigator bias[2]. It is regarded as something that must be made explicit, and if possible, neutralized or eradicated altogether. On the other hand, if one is working within the canons of the interpretive approach[3], one still cannot escape coming to an understanding of how one's presence within the on-going play of daily events contributes to the shaping of those events. The investigator becomes an actor and interpreter within an always-emerging discourse of social life which is to be understood and interpreted, but not minimalized nor eradicated -- an impossibility in any event according to this orientation.

This paper examines how an anthropologist's presence affected on-going social life in a rural Kenyan community by focusing on a personal conflict between a young American anthropologist living and working in the community,

and an older woman who was a local leader amongst its older women. The implicit role of gender definitions in the generation and maintenance of the conflict are pointed out and contextualized within the larger social and cultural field of which they are part. This paper should be seen as a contribution toward understanding the deconstruction of the role of anthropological fieldworker, a process which can help anthropologists understand more fully what we do when we "go to the field", and can help those interested in the effects of gender on the way we perceive and define our own and others' behavior.

About nine months into my African fieldwork, I remember congratulating myself on the way I avoided conflict with the research community. I was anticipating telling my colleagues how others had trouble, but I had none as a testimony to my fieldwork prowess. Very shortly I found myself embroiled in precisely that sort of conflict, fearing my research irreparably jeopradized. Before describing the conflict, however, a cultural context must be provided. What follows is of necessity brief; those interested in detailed descriptions of Kikuyu culture and social organization should read the excellent ethnographies which are available[4].

The Cultural Context[5]

The Kikuyu are a Bantu-speaking people who number over three million, the largest ethnic group in contemporary Kenya. Kikuyu are prominent in current national politics and were instrumental in the strife which led to Kenyan independence. Most Kikuyu families are actively involved in cash crop production as well as some subsistence production, and most have at least one family member working for wages. Rural Kikuyu areas are among the most developed of the reserve areas of the period of British control. Land holdings were consolidated during the late 1950's and early 1960's; geometric orderliness of the rural area is the result. Houses are arranged along the roads with

gardens behind in a European-like settlement pattern.

The structure and organization of the Kikuyu family is a familiar one for Africa. Each individual domestic unit is linked to a male head, who as a member of a corporate patrilineage, owns land which will be inherited by his sons through their mother. Polygyny is present, though its frequency appears to be declining. Divorce is infrequent. Marriages link two patrilineally-based families in continuous obligation to each other. Virilocal post-marital residence continues to be the pattern for nearly everyone. This means that most newly married couples share the same yard or homestead with the husband's parents, his unmarried sisters, and his brothers, whether married or not. Land shortage may be increasing the frequency of large extended family homesteads.

Two principles underlie patterns of authority: age and sex. Older have authority over younger, and male over female. Authority based in the age principle was elaborated in the age grade system. Good descriptions exist for the male system,[6] but little knowledge exists of the women's system. Much of the formal system disappeared as British governmental institutions became firmly established. Despite this loss, within the lineage older men and women retain authority over younger men and women, and they do not hesitate to assert their common will on the rebellious. Age-based patterns of deference are readily observed.

Adult men and women live in largely separate social worlds symbolized in the spatial arrangements of the homestead, customary eating and sleeping patterns, and occupancy of public space. Kikuyu have retained a marked division of labor by sex. Before the modern era, men cared for the cattle, sheep, and goats, and did the heaviest non-routine horticultural chores like clearing new land and putting up fences, in addition to growing some prestige crops like yams. Men also were occupied with the military, police and judicial tasks con-

fronting local groups through councils of elders generated by a combination of the age grade system, patrilineage, and local geography. Now men frequently go to urban centers to seek wage or salaried employment which absents them for several weeks at a time from their family until middle or late middle age. These men have ceased to be farmers in any meaningful sense. Even among those men who have remained in the rural areas, many have turned over formerly male chores to their wives, for instance care of the family livestock. They tend to spend their time engaged in local politics and visiting other men.

Women carry the primary burden of food production for the family. To them falls the planting, weeding, and harvesting of the maize, beans, potatoes and other crops that make up the bulk of the daily diet. But their chores are hardly begun with this work; they also are responsible for gathering firewood, hauling water for their families' needs, washing clothes, keeping their yards and homes swept and tidy, and bearing and rearing numerous children. Those numerous children in the past were a great help in getting all the work done, but today many are in school several hours a day, curtailing their usefulness for domestic economic tasks. At a time when many husbands have turned over their tasks to their wives, and much of the children's time is taken up with school work, a further burden has been added to the women's share of the domestic labor -- cash crops. The care and harvest of coffee or tea or pyrethrum or some other crop, and possibly the daily care of European-breed dairy cows which need dipping, milking, watering, and feeding now cries out for their attention.

As mentioned earlier, only males are the customary inheritors of land. Fathers pass land to their sons, though they may allow a daughter use rights if there is sufficient land for her brothers and if she lives close enough to make use of her father's land. Despite the potential to access through rights of usufruct, the only way to have secure access to the essential re-

source for survival for a woman is through marriage. Although right to garden the land is based in marriage to a particular man, women come to view their gardens and the produce from the gardens as their own or the family's. They talk about the income from the cash crops produced on this land as family money. While a few women are successful entrepreneurs in the local and regional markets, the majority have little or no external income of their own. A few shillings are earned selling eggs and excess subsistence production. Part of the income from cash crops, if they have any, will also come to the woman. This income is usually used for children's school fees or other family needs. Very few women obtain extensive formal education, so most have no skills to allow participation in the many new occupations which uniformly require school certification at or beyond the primary level. Consequently males, who always have controlled the key economic resource -- the land, have also come to control much of the space in the emergent modern economic system.

To complete the sketch of the cultural context, some information must be provided about Kikuyu orientation toward personal power. In general, Kikuyu are well-trained in the direct exercise of power, and are positively disposed towards its utilization. This training starts as soon as they begin to observe the complex interpersonal relations of their natal extended family in which the lines of authority are clearly spelled out, and in which individuals learn how to manipulate relationships to gain power not sanctioned by custom. The training extends throughout their lifetime[7]. In an earlier paper I describe the strategies and resources for power which are commonly utilized by both women and men[8]. As I pointed out in that paper, there is little difference between the sexes when they are interacting with members of their own sex -- the most common situation in this sex-segregated society. Both are willing to combine economic, political, prestige, and supernatural resources to attain personal or public ends. Both may also threaten or actually use direct physical force.

A favorite strategy is to gather together enough resources so that they can be given away judiciously in the interest of establishing networks of obligation. A person strives to become a source of patronage, of economic resources, and of influence.

The major differences between the sexes occur first in their access to the necessary resources to establish themselves in positions of power beyond the domestic domain, and second, within the domestic domain itself where males and females are more likely to become engaged in cross-sex struggles for control. In this arena, women are able to utilize their affective bonds with their children to form alliances against their husbands if they wish. This female resource is a direct outcome of the nature of the long term and primary relationships developed in the family. Kikuyu mothers develop close affective ties to their children while the children's fathers remain distant and aloof through the dictates of custom, the demands of the modern economy, and personal preferences. Consequently women's ability to use such strategies in the domestic setting is greatly enhanced. The Kikuyu situation is, I think, accurately represented in Peggy Sanday's recent analysis. Males are awarded rightful dominance but women have real power. A paradox is created and tension between the sexes is exacerbated[9].

The Cast

A social conflict requires a set of involved persons -- a kind of cast of characters, and so the last addition to the introductory comments is a description of those characters. The antagonists were a Kikuyu woman in her early sixties, called Njeri,[10] and a neophyte female ethnographer in her late twenties, the author. Njeri was the head of a local women's Harambee organization[11] with ties to KANU, the Kenyan national political party. In addition to their self-help projects, the local Harambee women were advocates of "traditionalism" represented most clearly in the institution of female

initiation. In the 1950's during the Mau Mau rebellion, Njeri had spent over a year in detention where an infant daughter died in her arms. One son was a known Mau Mau leader killed in the forest; her husband emerged a broken man after several years' detention. His inability to engage in sustained work contributed to Njeri's dominance in her household. Some felt that Njeri's presidency of the women's organization was a reward for her suffering. Though Njeri did not live in the research community, I visited her frequently because I liked the tough old woman. I performed numerous little favors for her and worried about her health.

A neophyte ethnographer, my status was still that of graduate student. Dependent on fellowships for a livelihood, my income was small by my own society's standards. Still subject to an academic committee's approval of my work to attain the goal I had set for myself several years before, I saw myself as socially powerless. I was a temporary visitor with no interest in local politics beyond additional information for my notes on political organization. I saw myself as more observer than participant.

Mrs. Mwangi, Mary, Alice, and John were research assistants. Mrs. Mwangi, a young widow my age with three children, also held an appointment as an elementary school teacher in the community where she lived five miles distant. This tall, handsome Kikuyu woman was self-assured and very determined to remain independent. She asserted she would never marry again, "even if he were a minister with portfolio." She became a good friend during this period. The others were all younger, unmarried local residents. Among them I also developed a close relationship with Mary.

Another participant in the social drama was Mr. Kariuki, the Headman. A dignified man in his early sixties, Mr. Kariuki was a devout Christian.

The Conflict

The fieldwork had progressed smoothly for nine months. Information had been collected on many subjects through interviews in participants' homes. A new interview was constructed to allow systematic exploration of attitudes about family roles and division of labor in the household. To insure privacy because we knew the women would be reluctant to answer some questions in front of their children, we arranged to interview the women in an unused room at the primary school. Because the interview was long, we gave each woman a gift of sugar as payment for her time. I had never done this before.

The first week of interviewing was uneventful. Mrs. Mwangi and I made advance appointments with each woman a day or two before her interview, while the other research assistants continued with different data collection tasks. Women readily agreed to the interview in the cooperative manner that had characterized all work to that time. Mrs. Mwangi and I would meet each interviewee at her home and drive her to the school in my car. We adopted this strategy to insure that an interview would start when planned. We felt considerable time pressure to complete all the interviews during the August school holiday while Mrs. Mwangi was free from her teaching duties. The younger, unmarried female research assistants could not help with this interview because we were exploring topics inappropriate for discourse between persons of married and unmarried status.

One week into the interviews we encountered indicators of potential difficulty. We heard that rumors were passing through the community regarding the diagrams of household and homestead layout that John was concurrently drawing--that they were to be used to show that Kikuyu are "primitive". An additional rumor implied that people's real names were to be used in a book about the community. Shortly we suffered interview refusals accompanied by peculiar excuses. Realizing that serious trouble was afoot, we began speculating about how to counteract it. We decided to visit the Harambee women's meeting

to explain what we were doing and why we were doing it in hopes of dispelling what we thought must be a gross misunderstanding about our current activities. The necessity to talk with them crystalized when John informed the rest of us later that day what he had seen and what a community resident had just related to him. He had observed Njeri, the head of the Harambee group, accompanied by a few companions going from house to house asking women questions. Upon enquiry, he learned that Njeri was asking about the interview and warning the women to stay away. She was implying to the women that our queries about family life were political in nature, and that my intention was to organize some kind of political group. We could do nothing until the next day's routine Harambee meeting. John suggested it would be best to let Njeri know that we intended to come to the meeting.

The next morning I picked up Mrs. Mwangi and Mary. We began searching for Njeri and found her walking on the road to town with two other women. We stopped and they all got in the Volkswagen while Njeri launched an angry verbal attack. She berated us all the way to town, continuing for another twenty minutes after we arrived at our destination in front of the bank where the Harambee women deposited their organization's money. We tried to be as conciliatory as possible, thinking that the problem was some simple and correctable missunderstanding of the interview itself. We reiterated the interview content and offered to interview her; we offered to give her copies of the interview written in Kikuyu and in English. Nothing would satisfy her. It was too late. We should have come to her first. These were "her" women and it was "her" group and we should have asked "her" permission. She attacked Mrs. Mwangi for helping me, pointing out the financial support everyone had given her long-dead husband while he was in school in England before he married Mrs. Mwangi. Mrs. Mwangi, incensed, countered that they used the same argument when she refused to oath.[12] Njeri refused us permission to

speak to the Harambee group; they would all run away, she averred, because she would not be present.

When we asked Njeri directly what we could do to make amends, she refused to answer, scowling, her lips grimly pressed. In exasperation, I asserted that the authority for my activities came from the Office of the President, from the District Commissioner, the District Officer, the Chief, and the Headman, and inquired if she wanted me to complain to the

Chief and the Headman about this business. She responded. "You can go where you wish and continue as you are," knowing we could do nothing.

It was clear we could get nowhere through further discussion with Njeri, so we left her in front of the bank, curious on-lookers standing nearby overhearing much of the exchange. We were all angry and frustrated. I also felt rejected, sad, and premonitions of doom plagued me. I thought Njeri was my friend. She was returning my many kindnesses in a very unkind fashion and I could not understand why.

Mrs. Mwangi, Mary, and I returned to the research community to judge the extent of Njeri's damage to our enterprise. The children ran from Mary and Alice when they tried to do behavior observations, women were unavailable for interviews to which they had agreed a few days earlier, and very few adults could be observed anywhere in the community. Overnight, it seemed, the whole atmosphere had altered, had become tense and oppressive. The community was unavailable to us except for the devout Christians, one of whom maintained her willingness to be interviewed at her appointed time that day. My sense of doom grew; I feared that I had lost nine months of work. We were just beginning to collect data essential to the central research problem; most data already in hand was background information for what was yet to come.

At the primary school we began the remaining scheduled interview. Another Christian woman from the community stopped by to give us a basket of food from her garden. This small gesture cheered me. Perhaps all was not lost.

Outside our interview room several people were gathering, some from the research community. All were devout Christians and they had come to attend the baptism of an elderly man who had recently decided to convert. The day before they had gathered at his homestead to instruct him in the

gravity of his decision and to publicly burn the gourds containing his protective magic. The baptism was to take place in the Anglican church on the school grounds.

We talked with some community residents gathering for the baptism about our difficulty. Mrs. Mwangi said that we were having some trouble, and they responded that they knew. They also offered that not everyone sympathized with Njeri; that some supported us. Mr. Kariuki, the Headman, walked over to our group. We told him about our situation. He asserted that Njeri was taking over authority that was not hers to take. He said he would contact each of the members of Njeri's ruling committee. He ended by commenting that he was of an age with these women and he knew how to handle them.

Later we learned from Mary's mother, who was visited by some Harambee women, that Njeri had visited the local head KANU man to try to secure his support for her actions. She tried to persuade him to go to the Headman and the Chief complaining about me. He told her to go herself. She had countered that she could not do that because they supported me. He in turn responded that if they knew what I was doing and supported me, he had no objection; she should forget it. She walked straight to the community and told each Harambee member not to cooperate in the research. At the Harambee meeting after our confrontation she had told the women "They're all against us." Fear moved some of those in attendance not to publicly disagree with their leader, although they were quite willing to make a special trip to tell Mary's mother of Njeri's visit to the KANU leader and about her remarks at the Harambee meeting, and to privately state their disagreement with her actions.

We now felt that whatever lay behind the trouble, it was something personal to Njeri and it was not a result of some widespread misunderstanding.

We also recognized that it was linked to her interpretation of the altered interview strategy; perhaps she thought I was looking for new friends among the other women. Someone offered the opinion that Njeri was unreasonably jealous. I could not comprehend how she could misconstrue my intentions, nor what was the source of her jealousy. It was obvious we could do no further work in the community for the present. Close to despair, I decided to travel to Nairobi for a few days. I kept fearing that the final resolution would be loss of the community for further research. At the time it was clear to me that the community's devout Christians and at least a few of Njeri's group supported me, as well as governmental authority. As far as could be known, everyone else opposed me in support of Njeri. This particular configuration brought into high relief what I suspected were current political allignments in the area, allignments with a long history.[13]

While I was in Nairobi, Alice told a few community residents that I had loaned Njeri 200 Kenya shillings,[14] a large sum of money. Some months before she had come to Mary asking her to petition me for 200K.Sh. to replace money she had borrowed from the Harambee treasury to give to her son. They wanted their money and she had no resources for repaying it. She was in a very difficult position and apparently desperate. Through Mary I had provided the necessary funds, ostensibly as a loan. I instructed Mary to tell Njeri that only half had come from me while she had furnished the rest. At the time I thought that she might feel some constraint to repay the portion attributed to Mary, a local resident; I assumed she would not feel such constraint regarding me. Given what I knew about Njeri's resources, it was an impossibly large sum of money for her to repay anyone very quickly. Many in the community interpreted Njeri's behavior as stealing.

When I returned, Mary told me what Alice had done. I was irritated with her for telling people that I had loaned Njeri money. My displeasure rested in my personal belief drawn from my own culture that it was morally improper to use information about what I saw as an unrelated transaction in the current conflict -- a kind of "inadmissiable evidence" reasoning.

We cautiously resumed our work. The children were no longer running from Mary's and Alice's observation, and Mrs. Mwangi and I arranged interviews with still uninterviewed Christians. We were uncertain about the rest of the women.

Our first day back in the community a local man approached us saying we could interview his wife who belonged to the Harambee women because she did not agree with Njeri. He added. "The men don't agree with her; she's trying to usurp the Chief's authority. If the Chief approves, we approve." This was our first clear indication that public opinion was moving away from Njeri. Encouraged, we began to move with greater confidence, though we continued to avoid asking those women most centrally involved in the Harambee group for interviews. We decided to visit Njeri.

Mrs. Mwangi and I found her at home with her friend and neighbor Wambui. After some discussion she agreed to be interviewed if we came the next afternoon.

The next afternoon Mrs. Mwangi and I arrived at Njeri's homestead, interviews in hand. I thought happily that we could now put all this business behind us. Njeri refused to be interviewed saying she had never agreed to the interview. I was shocked. She <u>knew</u> she had told us to return specifically to interview her. She <u>knew</u> we <u>knew</u> that to be the case. And still she could stand there and lie in the most righteous manner! We tried to argue with ther. The ensuing encounter lasted nearly an hour. In passing I commented that I did not know that I would interview women privately when

I first came to the area. Njeri latched onto this remark saying that in that case it was different; now she would speak to the women and explain this matter. We should return in three days and let her know if the women were behaving differently. She also said that we did not respect her because we had not come to her first, and that since Mrs. Mwangi was from another area, it was no longer a local project. Further, she added that my giving sugar to the women was offensive to some--they were participating because they wanted to participate. Then Njeri said, "You can go all over the sublocation and work here even for two years--but in the end you will carry me in your car." Exasperated, Mrs. Mwangi said, "Let's go. This woman is worse than any man I ever had to deal with." Later she told me that she got headaches everytime we had an extended encounter with Njeri. For myself, indigestion was more typical.

A few days later I decided that we did not need to give the full interview anymore. Answers had become very predictable. We could finish the remaining subsection of the interview in the women's homes. We did not return to visit Njeri as she requested. We did not need her cooperation to successfully complete our task and I had lost all interest in regaining her friendship.

One week later we called on a member of the Harambee ruling committee residing in the research community. Stopping her work to speak with us; she offered to participate in the interview. Surprised and pleased because all other members of the ruling committee had steadfastly refused to be interviewed, we began to discuss when she might be free to do it. As we talked we noticed Njeri walking on the road toward the shops. She turned abruptly, walking rapidly toward us. Wangui's demeanor changed instantly from pleasant sociability to fear. Abruptly breaking the conversation, she walked hurriedly toward Njeri, greeting her just inside

the homestead fence thirty yards from us. Twenty minutes later she returned, saying she could not participate in the interview after all. We told her we understood her difficult position and were not upset that she had changed her mind. She seemed relieved and we left. Gossip said that Wangui wanted Njeri's position as head of the Harambee women. We interpreted her offer of an interview as a move to align herself with dominant community opinion, break with Njeri, and in the process undermine Njeri in such a way as to perhaps bring herself closer to the headship of the Harambee organization. Unfortunately Njeri caught her in the act and she was clearly not ready to challenge her in a face-to-face encounter. We never learned what Njeri said to Wangui; we could only surmize its general tenor.

After this incident we did not see Njeri for several weeks until Mary and I encountered her in the local market. She greeted us, saying she no longer objected to the interview so long as Mrs. Mwangi did not participate. Mary felt that Njeri's distaste for Mrs. Mwangi grew from Mrs. Mwangi's steadfast refusal to give way to her. Her rhetoric, however, drew on notions of Mrs. Mwangi's foreignness--she came from a different community and should not be privey to local secrets.

The next day another Harambee woman in the research community stopped us on the path to gossip. She said she had just told Njeri that she would agree to an interview if I asked her because I came through the government, not on my own. Njeri had snapped back that she felt that way because her son had studied in America. She countered that if that was so, why hadn't I come to her first? Njeri said nothing.

In the end all but three women participated in the interview. Those three were members of the Harambee ruling committee. I never saw Njeri again except at a distnace. I was told from time to time that she asked about me.

Discussion

The description of the conflict required some reconstruction of personally unwitnessed events; the discussion will require attribution of motivation to others that could not be checked against their perceptions. It is probable that the other participants had somewhat different interpretations of the on-going stream of events. The analysis that I am offering includes my research assistants' and my joint interpretation of Njeri's behavior at the time as recorded in my notes. It also includes interpretive insight born of additional experience since the described events transpired. Recognition of the depth of my personal contribution to the generation of the confrontation came later, long after my departure. That was the more difficult understanding to achieve.

I arrived with the notion already in place that I should carry out research that a male anthropologist would find difficult--in the words of my advisor, Dorothea Leighton, "Don't go over there and do something any man could do." Among the sex-segregated Kikuyu, that meant I should do research among women, and that is where I concentrated most of my attention. Consequently, I gradually became socialized into their view of Kikuyu society and took on many of their attitudes toward Kikuyu men. I also began to adopt their avoidance of male space and of casual social interaction with males. It took some time before I recognized that this had happened, however, because the process by which it occurred was not at all immediately evident. No one ever said to me "Don't talk to men", or "Don't go there, that's male territory". My absorption into the women's world made it easier for Njeri to see me as a competitor for influence among the women. If I had been a man, or if I had chosen to study some aspect of the male world, I doubt that the conflict would have emerged as it did. It would not have been possible for me to engage the women in the same way. Direct public confrontations across sex lines are rare, while they occur more frequently within same sex grouping.

Njeri's strategy involved the manipulation of fundamental distinctions embedded in the culture which contribute to the structure of contemporary Kikuyu society, as well as direct manipulation through lying. The distinctions either drawn on by Njeri or implicit throughout were male vs. female, formal authority vs. informal power, outsider vs. insider, Christian vs. "traditional" Kikuyu, and rich vs. poor.

Njeri first attempted to completely close-off my access to the community by enlisting formal authority in her cause through a male political intermediary, the local KANU leader. Local appointive representatives of government had provided necessary initial approval of my presence and activities, and they were the quickest and cleanest route to their termination. Njeri's past political activity and associations led her to seek help from the KANU leader through whom she hoped to influence the Chief and Headman. That failed. Next she used her personal power and her own formal authority over Harambee members to order non-cooperation. These senior women in turn influenced daughters-in-law who shared their homesteads

toward non-cooperation. "They're all against us," was Njeri's attempt to generate solidarity for her cause among the Harambee women by utilizing a conjunction of the formal authority/informal power distinction and male/female opposition which placed the conflict on a broader stage. "...she's trying to usurp the Chief's authority," demonstrated her success. "The men don't agree with her..." pointed to an important miscalculation. The visit to Mary's mother by a few Harambee women immediately following the meeting underscored another error.

Njeri drew the insider/outsider boundary between me, the outsider European, and Mrs. Mwangi, the insider Kikuyu and all other Kikuyu, in an initial skirmish. During our final conversation she inverted Mrs. Mwangi's and my positions. Few remained her supporters and I had ceased courting her approval. She was willing to make me an insider privey to local secrets; but Mrs. Mwangi, that tough, rock-ribbed debater, had to go.

Christian vs. "traditional" Kikuyu was implicit throughout. The devout Christians were the only women who spoke to us through the entire conflict. Their support was based in their allignment of me as an educated European, and my activities, which were clearly supported by the government whose local representatives were devout Christians, with the new order and modernism. To be a devout Christian is to refuse to initiate your daughters, to refuse to accept kin group responsibility to pay compensation for your son's follies, and to refuse to oath political loyalty. It also means terminating mundane social relations with the less devout and with non-Christians. It codes differences in personal educational and occupational attainment, and economic success, and in children's scholastic and occupational achievement--all important indicators of emerging stratification. Njeri had used my occasional presence at Harambee meetings in the past to lend prestige to her group's support of the traditional practice of female initiation.[15]

Now she chose to turn the unwitting local European champion of female initiation into an ally of the non-clitorectomized Christians, and of male authority residing in the local representatives of government, placing me in opposition to most of the women. This maneuver also alligned me with the economically most secure segment of the community.

I do not know what role was played by Njeri's indebtedness to me in her initial and continuing motivations to action. Kikuyu concern with attainment of wealth, however, needs to be noted[16], as does wealth's usefulness as a means to power over others and to status advancement. My ability to command a variety of resources was clearly involved.

So long as I pursued her approval Njeri was in position to assert her control over me. The pattern of negotiation--a declaration by Njeri to cooperate followed by denial, followed by further negotiation during which she tried to place herself in the role of controlling intermediary revealed her motivation and her goals. "In the end you will carry me in your car," was unmistakable in its import. Njeri intended to enhance her power and prestige; she would control me utterly.

I responded intensely to Njeri's actions. I could not comprehend what motivated her behavior. I was blind to her perceptions of situation because I conceptualized my activities differently. I was deeply hurt because I liked the tough old woman and had gone out of my way to do things for her. I saw her behavior as a betrayal of the trust of friendship. In reviewing my fieldnotes made at the height of the conflict, I note that I characterized her as an "evil" woman. In addition to seeing her behavior as moral failure, I placed it in the framework of psychopathy because I had never before encountered such perfidy in relations with someone I categorized as a friend and regarded with some warmth. And coloring it all was the threat to successful completion of my <u>rite de passage</u> to the status of professional anthropologist. I feared

I would lose the entire community and have to start again somewhere else. The data we were just beginning to collect were essential to the dissertation topic. My fantasies regarding Njeri were intensely aggressive in their explicit content--I wanted to kill her.

It took great distance and time for me to come to a more complete understanding of the experience through dispassionate contemplation. After I was once again living in the United States I recognized the reasonable basis for her perceptions of me as a powerful person who controlled considerable wealth which she was using to gain influence among local women. As an American, my bias is not to openly acknowledge distinctions of wealth, power, status, and rank, even though I am well aware of them.[17] The obvious differences in wealth and education between me and most of those among whom I carried out my research did not go unrecognized at the time. I tried to ignore them, however, because they made me uncomfortable. I redoubled my efforts at suppression. Comments like "She's too jealous", offered by my research assistants in explication of Njeri's behavior, simply did not affect my interpretation at the time. I discounted them as ridiculous, preferring to dwell on attributions of psychopathy seeing her as a paranoid character or as a sociopath because of her lies and breaches of friendship. As an American woman, my tendency is to feel sufficiently conflicted about personal power that it has been hard for me to recognize its presence in myself, and then to use it openly and directly when I do recognize it. These cultural biases have been enhanced by my socialization into the anthropological profession with its tendency to champion the causes of those seen as socially powerless while also feeling ambivalent about those in positions of substantial political and economic influence who are frequently portrayed as exploiters and oppressors. My very American, female, and anthropological orientation toward these distinctions created a blindness not shared by openly hierarchical Kikuyu who, without regard to gender, are reared in the

unconflicted exercise of personal power over others, and who consequently could better afford to recognize the game for what it was.

Several years ago Anne Roe[18] carried out a study which attempted to identify dominant personality patterns characteristic of eminent professionals in each of several academic disciplines. In her discussion of anthropologists, she states that those who participated in her study were notable for their conflicts surrounding issues of dependency among other things. To the extent that dependency is an important issue in the dynamics of my own personality--and I believe that it is--we can further enrich our understanding of my response to the situation and to Njeri in particular.

Fieldwork requires the ethnographer to place herself in a dependent position vis a vis the research community. It is in the community's power to withhold or give the resources essential to the ethnographer's sense of professional self-esteem, competence, and worthiness. For the neophyte on her or his first major field study, the stakes are even higher for it is also the test of admission to the profession. This situation can be expected to produce at least a low level of continuous anxiety in the fieldworker with dependency concerns. When a threat to successful completion of the work occurs we would expect hostility to be aroused in the ethnographer, and that it would be directed toward the source of the threat provided other defenses do not intervene. This is an accurate description of my subjective state at the time. An indicator of the intensity of my hostility toward Njeri is the content of my fantasies during the conflict. The number of times I have dreamed or fantasized killing someone is few; I can only remember three other examples over my entire life. Of particular interest here is the scenario of my most frequent fantasy concerning Njeri. It gave me great pleasure to imagine blowing her up as she sat in her latrine defecating. This daydream can be interpreted to point toward concerns constituting the anal/urethral phase of early childhood development as

described by Erikson[19]. This is precisely the phase where issues of autonomy and dependency come to the foreground. That I should select that particular way to do away with my antagonist was no accident. I believe that the intensity of my response was enhanced by the particular nature of my own unconsciously motivated interpretations of the situation.

And lastly my blindness at the time was also a product of a not well-articulated adherence to an essentially positivist epistemology which had permeated my training. I was passing out research instruments, collecting systematic behavior observations, and largely ignoring my role as actor in the local community. I was busy doing science, and when I returned to the states, I would analyze my data largely ignorant of the epistemological issues raised by the interpretive school. The tension between these two philosophically disparate orientations to research remains unresolved in my own mind as it does in the discipline as a whole. Awareness of its import, however, means that my research can never again be carried out with the same innocence.

Conclusions

Social conflicts are generally regarded as excellent sources of information about social process and culture. My interpretation of this conflict was affected by several factors: my definition of the relationship between myself and Njeri; my self-definitions as a woman, an American, an anthropologist, a visitor, a decent human being without evil or exploitative intentions, as a person with little personal influence possessed of relatively few material resources; my personality, and my academic training. As Honigmann pointed out, data are ". . . not reflections of facts or relationships existing independently of the observer. In the process of knowing, external facts are sensorily perceived and immediately transformed into conceptualized experience, the observer being an active factor in the creation of knowledge, not a passive recipient or register."[20] I have tried to deconstruct my conceptualization of what happened between my antagonist and me.

The feminist critique[21] of ethnology, ethnography, and the ethnographic process has concentrated its attacks more on what is seen as a male bias produced because of an historical imbalance in the number of male and female researchers going to the field and a false consciousness on the part of many female ethnographers who see the world as their male colleagues see it. When we consider the possible effects of gender on fieldwork, however, I am suggesting that the problem is more complex than an accusation of male bias or false consciousness might suggest. The conflict presented here involved two women of different generations who came from two different cultures which embody two different characterizations of ideal female sex roles. Each woman to some extent manifested values, attitudes, and behaviors expected of women in her own culture, and they collectively contributed to the patterning of the conflict as it unfolded. One of the clearest examples of this was the difference in our orientations toward hierarchy and the exercise of power over others within our own sex group. Some of my most negative interpretations of Njeri's behavior were rooted in my own culture's sex role expectations; her behavior took on different meanings within the boundaries of Kikuyu culture. We must sensitize ourselves to the way our own perceptions and attribution of meaning to other women's behavior across cultures is affected by the gender-patterned assumptions we carry within ourselves as we consider the effects of gender on all social and psychological research. I regard this as a challenge and a source of richness for our understanding of the human condition, not as a weakness to be eliminated in a search for some ultimate reality.

Notes

1. The 1971-72 fieldwork that provided the context for the events described in this paper was supported by the Carnegie Corporation through the Child Development Research Unit, University of Nairobi and Harvard University, John W. M. Whiting and Beatrice B. Whiting, Directors. Carolyn Sachs read earlier drafts making helpful comments, but the final paper is wholly the author's responsibility. I wish to thank Helen Crawford for her excellent manuscript typing.

2. Robert Rosenthal, Experimenter Effects in Behavioral Research (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1976) is exemplary of this way of thinking.

3. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, eds., Interpretive Social Science: A Reader (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) is a good introduction to this orientation.

4. See, for example, Jomo Kenyata, Facing Mt. Kenya (1938; rpt. London: Secker and Warburg, 1968); Louis S. B. Leakey, The Southern Kikuyu Before 1903, Vols. 1-3 (New York: Academic Press, 1977); W. Scoresby Routledge and Katherine Routledge, With a Prehistoric People: The Akikuyu of British East Africa (1910; rpt. London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd., 1968).

5. A fuller discussion of this material is available in Susan Abbott, "Power Among Kikuyu Women: Domestic and Extra-Domestic Resources and Strategies", Anthropological Papers in Memory of Earl H. Swanson, Jr., Lucille B. Harten, Claude N. Warren and Donald R. Tuohy, eds. (Pocatello, Idaho: Idaho Museum of Natural History, 1980), pp. 8-14.

6. See H. E. Lambert, Kikuyu Social and Political Institutions (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

7. See Robert A. LeVine, "Patterns of Personality in Africa", Ethos, 1(1973), 123-152; Beatrice B. Whiting and John W. M. Whiting, The Children of Six Cultures (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974).

8. Susan Abbott, "Power Among Kikuyu Women: Domestic and Exta-Domestic Resources and Strategies", Anthropological Papers in Memory of Earl H. Swanson, Jr., Lucille B. Harten, Claude N. Warren, and Donald R. Tuohy, eds., (Pocatello, Idaho: Idaho Museum of Natural History, 1980), pp. 8-14.

9. Peggy R. Sanday, Female Power and Male Dominance: On the Origins of Sexual Inequality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

10. All proper names are pseudonyms.

11. Kenya's Harambee groups in response to President Kenyatta's call for self-help in development at the local level. In the research location, the Harambee women were important movers in building the local secondary schools, and in 1971-72 were engaged in earning money to put corrugated metal roofs on all members' homes. Members were mature matrons generally over 40 years old with the exception of one literate young woman who served as secretary.

12. During the political crisis following Tom Mboya's assassination in the late 1960's Kenyatta ordered all Kikuyu to take an oath of loyalty to the constituted government which he controlled. The oath followed a traditional form and was administered by local individuals affiliated with KANU. Njeri participated as an oath giver. Many devout Christians as well as relatively well-educated persons like Mrs. Mwangi refused to take the oath. The devout refused it on religious grounds because they defined it as a pagan ritual, while others refused because this traditional form had no meaning for them. Some commented that they found it silly while recognizing that it was a powerful political device because many still believed in the power of the oath to wreak supernatural vengence on those who broke it. Social pressure made it very difficult to remain in a rural community without oathing. Neighbors would shun non-oathers, shop clerks would refuse to sell basic commodities to them, others would refuse to help them with essential farm chores, and over it all was a pall of threatened, sometimes actual, physical violence. Mrs. Mwangi initially refused to oath because it had no meaning to her. Holding out for several months, she finally capitulated so that she could continue to live in her community. Njeri had been directly involved in a serious physical attack on one research community resident who repudiated her oath to fellow Christians.

13. For a fictional treatment of the political results of the introduction of Christianity among Kikuyu, see James Ngugi, The River Between (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd.; 1965).

14. About $30 US.

15. Female initiation has been a center of controversy for at least sixty years among Kikuyu. European Christian missionaries, especially Presbyterians, were opposed to the initiation of girls because it involved clitorectomy. They ruled that permitting the initiation of daughters was grounds for dismissal from church membership. The issue soon became a focal point in the politics of opposition to British rule. Kenyatta's famous ethnography of his own people, Facing Mt. Kenya, is in part an apology for female initiation aimed at a European audience. In 1971-72 over 80% of the female residents in the research community over thirteen years of age were initiated. Most residents were Anglican and a few were Roman Catholic. Neither denomination has been vigorous in its opposition to female initiation. Male initiation which involves circumcision has never been opposed by the established missionary churches and 100% of the age-appropriate males in the community were initiated.

16. See Susan Abbott and Thomas Arcury, "Continuity with Tradition: Male and Female in Gikiyu Culture," Youth and Society, 8 (1977), pp. 329-358.

17. See Francis L. K. Hsu, "American Core Value and National Character", Psychological Anthropology, 2nd ed., F. L. K. Hsu, ed., (Cambridge: Schenkman, 1972), pp. 241-262, for a discussion of American conflict over status differences. Robert A LeVine, "Patterns of Personality in Africa", Ethos 1 (1973), 123-152, provides an insightful description of general trends in African personality relevant to this discussion.

18. Anne Roe, "A Psychological Study of Eminent Psychologists and Anthropologists and a Comparison with Biologists and Physical Scientists," Psych. Monographs 67 (1952), pp. 1-55.

19. Erik H. Erikson, Childhood and Society, 2nd. ed. (1950; rpt. New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1963), pp. 80-85.

20. John J. Honigmann, "The Personal Approach in Cultural Anthropological Research", Current Anthropology 17 (1976), pp. 243-261.

21. See, for example, Rayna R. Reiter, ed., Toward an Anthropology of Women (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975); M. Kay Martin and Barbara Voorhies, Female of the Species (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975); Shirley Ardener, ed., Perceiving Women (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1975); Michelle Z. Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., Women, Culture, and Society (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).